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The net-zero pledges are dubious. Burning fossil fuels for economic growth remains the priority

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Activists take part in a demonstration ahead of the UN Climate Change Conference, in Glasgow, Scotland, on Oct. 28. **RUSSELL CHEYNE/Reuters**

The climate conference that starts in Glasgow this weekend is turning into a global prisoner's dilemma.

It is, of course, in all countries' interests to pursue the common good by reducing carbon emissions so that potentially catastrophic global warming, a definite economy killer over the long term, is averted. Reduced output also cleans the air we breathe, spurs the growth of a vast renewable energy industry and helps ensure that carbon sinks – forests – are not eradicated. Everyone wins.

But it is also in each country's interest to pursue immediate GDP growth to create wealth and jobs. The most efficient way to do so is to burn fossil fuels – coal, oil and natural gas – as quickly as possible. That's the dilemma – common interest or self-interest?

What is COP26? A guide to the Glasgow climate talks – the world's most consequential environment conference

There is a distressingly good chance that the burn-baby-burn approach will win the day at the climate conference, known as COP26 (Conference of the Parties). There is no compelling reason to think that this conference will be any different than all the previous ones.

Since the first United Nations climate change conference, in Berlin in 1995, planet-warming carbon dioxide emissions have gone one way – up, relentlessly – despite endless efforts at annual COPs to stop or at least slow their growth. Targets are set, commitments made. Then pretty much nothing.

In the mid-1960s, atmospheric carbon dioxide was measured at about 320 parts per million. The latest readings put it at almost 420 ppm, according to the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. That's as much as it was four million years ago, when the average sea level was 24 metres higher than today and the average temperature some 3.9 degrees higher than before the Industrial Revolution.



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dominates the agenda, despite great leaps forward in the “green” economy, whose features range from recycling and wind farms to electric cars and sustainable hydrogen production.

Coal, the dirtiest fossil fuel, simply refuses to die. Last year, a record-tying 38 gigawatts of coal plants were shuttered, mostly in the United States and Europe. But China alone is set to open 39 gigawatts of new plants, according to Bloomberg Green.

One step forward, one step back – maybe a bit more than one step back. The current energy crisis in Europe and China, partly the result of the failure of renewables to meet demand, has seen several countries, including the U.K., switch their coal burners back on to keep the lights on. European governments are now obsessed with burning more fossil fuels, not less, at least until the energy crisis abates.

But what about the net-zero emission commitments?

Most countries, including Canada, have pledged to achieve net zero by 2050, though a few big emitters – notably China, Indonesia, Russia and Saudi Arabia – insist they can’t get there until 2060 (Germany and Sweden went for 2045). Net zero means not adding to the level of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. It is achieved by drastic emission cuts combined with offsetting measures, such as planting trees, to compensate for the emissions that can’t be eliminated.

The net-zero pledges are both welcome and dubious.

Most are back-end loaded, meaning the majority of the cuts are to come well after 2030, the year by which many countries have set interim reduction targets (Canada is aiming to cut its emissions to at least 40 per cent below 2005 levels by 2030). By then, the majority of politicians who made the pledges will be out of office or six feet under.

Most of these targets also assume that steady technological advances and outright breakthroughs – the Bill Gates tech-will-save-us philosophy – will make the targets easier to achieve. Wishful thinking, in other words. No government is asking its citizens to go on a carbon diet. You don’t win elections by insisting on smaller houses, smaller (or no) cars, no holidays that require air travel and buying second-hand clothes and mobile phones.



by 2050, theoretically allowing Prime Min

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held high.

Australia is one of the biggest producers and exporters of fossil fuels, and it appears Mr. Morrison has no intention of tampering with his country's traditional wealth-creation strategy. The Aussie coal and gas industries will not disappear. There will be no carbon tax, and Australians will not pay more for energy.

Fossil fuel exports will not figure into the national accounting for the net-zero goal. That means the emissions that come from burning the exported coal in, say, China, will be China's problem, not Australia's. At the same time, Australia is not budging on its meagre 2030 emissions-reduction target of 26 per cent to 28 per cent. There are no plans to put any of the reductions into legislation.

It is "technology" that will allow Australia to reach its 2050 goal, Mr. Morrison said. What technology? No details, sorry. Forgive us for thinking that the Morrison approach is a classic case of kicking the can down the road.

Sadly, Australia's lack of climate ambition, while extreme among wealthy countries, is not unique. In the days leading up to COP26, China and India, the biggest and third-biggest sources of global emissions, respectively, declined to tighten their targets (India has only committed to reducing its carbon intensity per unit of GDP output). China plans to boost coal production until at least 2025. India's environment secretary, Rameshwar Prasad Gupta, was blunt in his explanation for his country's position: "We depend on coal and we would like to continue."

You can see where this is going as the COP26 pavilions fill with thousands of climate delegates, desperate to keep hope alive. Economic growth will not be sacrificed for emissions reductions. No miracle technology exists to replace fossil fuels in the near term, so they will continue to be burned in vast quantities for at least the next decade, probably longer.

Never mind that all sorts of economic models suggest that failing to keep the global average temperature increase to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels – the 2015 Paris Agreement aspiration – would be catastrophic for the economy as well as the environment.



A two-degree rise would crunch the economy by 11 per cent. Already, the average temperature has climbed more than one degree.

We are on a course for climate – and economic – disaster. Economic self-interest remains the priority of many big emitters, and it's doubtful that COP26 will change that appalling reality. The question is whether the next COPs will have more success. History says they won't.

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